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ABSTRACT

Reasons for the disproportionate failure rate of young urban African American males were studied in an ethnographic study of third- and sixth-grade classrooms in a low-income African American community. The multimethod approach involved observing classroom sessions and school activities, interviewing students and teachers, and examining documentary evidence of student performance. In this school, the conflict between ideology and reality created a "structural" hypocrisy that was so pervasive and so deeply rooted that those who participated in it were not always aware of it. It is argued that the difference in socialization patterns of low-income Black males predisposes them to reject the hypocrisy as they move up in grade level. Hypocrisy was apparent in the overall culture of the school, the culture of the classroom, and in the language of the classroom. Students were aware of the difference between what was advocated and what was practiced, and their awareness increased as they grew older. Transcripts of conversations with students at both grade levels show many discrepancies between what the schools say they want to do for students and what they actually do. Statements revealing a lack of respect from the teachers were frequently made by the boys, and were often made by sixth graders. These students then responded to what they perceived as unfairness through failing grades and resisting authority. (SLD)

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The Impact of Structural Hypocrisy on the School Performance of Young African American Males.

by

Donna Penn Towns, Ph.D

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"The Impact of Structural Hypocrisy on the School Performance of Young African American Males"

by

Donna Penn Towns, Ph.D.

In this paper, I present some conclusions that I drew as a result of doing classroom ethnography for two years in third- and sixth-grade classrooms in schools located in a major city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. I call the city "Metro-city." I was seeking reasons for the disproportionate failure rate of young black males in the school system.

My conclusions are supported by data derived from my observations, from teacher and student interviews and from essays written by the students. Most of the data will be from the school located in a low-income, African American community, which formed the focus of the ethnography that resulted from the study. I call the community Winton Meadows and the school Winton Elementary School. I refer to the third-grade teachers as Mrs. Able and Mrs. Baker; the sixth-grade teacher as Mrs. Charles. From time to time, however, I will refer to data from schools in a middle class community and in a multicultural, working-class community that helped to provide a context for comparison, which, as you know, is an integral part of any anthropological study. I have named these schools Crest Elementary and St. Felicitas Elementary, respectively.

Struck by statistics, with which we are all too familiar today, of black males being disproportionately represented in all the negative social indices (incarceration, homicide, school drop-outs, school failures and so forth), and recognizing the problem as a systemic one and the school as a significant part of that system, I asked myself what factors within the school could be contributing to the problem. As an anthropologist, my natural inclination was to approach the study from a cultural perspective and to explore the cultural factors in the school that could possibly be negatively affecting the school performance of African-American children and young males, in particular.

The multi-level methodological approach involved observing classroom sessions, sitting-in on PTA and teachers' meetings, attending whole school assemblies, eating in the cafeteria with students and teachers, participating in playground activities, going on field trips; interviewing both children and adult personnel in the school, and examining documentary evidence of student performance. All these together rendered an in-depth picture of the plurality of cultures that interplay as the participants attempt to derive meaning from their disparate experiences.

In the ethnography, I pinpoint aspects of the school culture which make the culture of the school unique, on the one hand, while reflecting the norms and values of the dominant, white, middle-class culture of American society in general, on the other (Erickson, 1987; Heath, 1978; Henry, 1963; Ogbu, 1987; Page, 1990; Spindlers, 1982; Harry Wolcott, 1976, 1992). I demonstrate ways in which this culture conflicts with the culture that low-income, African American children from the inner-city bring to their school experience (Boykin, 1980; Fordham, 1987; Hale-Benson, 1988; Heath, 1983; Ogbu, 1982; Shade and Edwards 1987).

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It was in the year following my fieldwork, as I sifted through notes, transcribed tapes and agonized over the meaning of it all, that I was drawn to the literature of the critical theorists. I needed to understand the gloom and sadness that marked the whole experience for me. Such words as despair, contradictions and disparities began to loom high in my mind. I began to think about the disparities between words and actions--between ideology and reality--found not only in this particular school, but in American society in general in its beliefs about schools and the role of education.

I found kindred spirits among the critical pedagogists who have voiced the opinion that many of the problems experienced by children in school, and particularly by minority children, are a function of the disparity between the ideology authorities profess and the reality students experience (Michael Apple 1988; Marshall Berman 1982; Henry Giroux 1989; Jacob Klein 1972; Jonathan Kozol 1991; Thomas La Belle 1972; Michael Lewis 1993; Peter McLaren 1989; David Melton 1975; Arthur Powell 1985; Ray Rist 1973; Ted Sizer 1984; Charles Tesconi 1973; Paul Willis 1977). These people spoke of "contradictory values" (LaBelle 1972:522), "A heterogeneity of ideological and social forms colliding..." (McLaren 1989:160), the oppositional stance that minority youth take in response (McLeod 1987); the ways in which schools resemble prisons and how parents attempt to hide this truth from their children (Melton 1975).

They spoke of "contradictions which exist between the stated educational goals and the outcomes resulting from the mode and manner in which we educate" (Klein 1973:2). One of these contradictions is the superimposition of a democratic governmental structure over a culture that was basically autocratic in attitude and function. The latter is a reference to the American colonial culture which was "not strongly inclined toward democratic principles..." with its slavery, class distinction, property rights requirements, religious bigotry and male domination. Klein points out that merely mouthing a philosophic belief is not enough to combat prevailing traditions that are inconsistent with it.

Michael Lewis, who wrote about the inequities in American life and the disparity between stated beliefs and actions in his Culture of Inequality (1978), found no change in the situation fifteen years later when a second edition of the book was printed with only a new introduction to make it topical. One of the examples he gives of this is how Americans make a great show of valuing children and of being willing to invest in them and yet, year after year, vote against raising taxes that are earmarked for the improvement of educational facilities for children (Lewis 1993). Jonathan Kozol (1991)in his Savage Inequalities makes the same point, particularly in regard to schools that service poor children and minorities. Many point out the deleterious affects of bureaucracy and the new technocracy on both students and teachers (Tesconi & VanCleve 1973).

Looking more at the macro-culture outside the school, Lewis and Saarni (1993) seek an explanation for the reality of lies and deception in everyday life in. These lies are a kind of hypocrisy, which I believe is an integral part of mainstream, middle class culture in America.

Literature on socialization patterns in lower class African American homes indicates that boys are socialized differently from girls and from white males in order to prepare them to accept what one sociologist has called the "polarities of ambivalence" which they must face as adults in a white society (Cohen and Bailey 1977). Others have noted that while younger children in low-income African-American families are not included in adult conversation, they are constantly in the presence of adults. Little is hidden from them whether it be negative or positive. Lies and

deception are not so much a part of the culture (Lewis and Saarni 1993).

Particularly relevant to this study is a statement by Sigman and Snyder (1993:154) to the effect that "we make excuses for our actions to be viewed by others and by ourselves as being consistently good and in control people." I could see this phenomenon, in my study, as a partial explanation of the teacher's need to maintain control and the student's need to appear "good" in the eyes of the teacher.

The effect of all this on teachers is not overlooked. Page states that this contradiction causes teachers to be "persistently unsatisfied with themselves and with students," but the reasons (being torn by opposite values) are rarely noted (1990:54). Hutchins (1972) refers to the deep and permanent melancholia that underlies the American temperament. Michael Apple (1988) insightfully expressed this melancholia with respect to teachers in particular as a "self-hatred" that is derived from the realization that "the educational system won't change the world, and that education makes little difference in the long run to macro-social relations" (1988:179).

I recognize this melancholia and ascribe it to a subconscious recognition of the disparity between American ideals and reality. Examining my data in light of the theoretical framework to which I have just alluded, I came to my conclusion regarding the role that subconscious deception plays both in the micro-culture of the school and the macro-culture of American society and the relationship between the two. I recognized this subconscious deception as a characteristic particularly attributable to middle class Anglo-American culture of which the school is a part and, consequently, as the source of the problem facing young inner-city black males in the system.

My suggestion is that the conflict between ideology and reality creates a need to mask reality. I refer to this mask as hypocrisy--a kind of hypocrisy that is so pervasive and deeply entrenched in the system that those who participate in it are not always aware of its existence. In other words, it is a "structural hypocrisy."

I conclude that the difference in socialization patterns of low-income, black males predisposes them to reject the hypocrisy as they move up in grade level. This rejection results in passive or active resistance, both of which lead to their ultimate failure in the school system.

What are the evidences of this hypocrisy in the school?

Hypocrisy in the Overall Culture of the School

Hypocrisy lies in the claim by the federal and local governments of having equal concern for all citizens and the obvious difference between the care shown for the physical environment of Winton Elementary and that of the upper- and middle-class areas of the city. Such disparity is evidenced in the demographics of Metro-city taken from 1990 Census Data.

In the ethnography, I described the culture of Winton Elementary, starting with its physical appearance and surroundings. In the absence of a theory of hypocrisy, it is difficult to understand the contrast between the broad, smoothly paved, tree-lined avenues of the upper-class areas in the city and the potholed avenues lined only by dilapidated structures found in the Winton Meadows area.

Hypocrisy lies in questioning children's expressed displeasure over having to attend school when its appearance (solid metal doors and barred windows) is more like that of a prison and its rules and regulations appear more punitive than beneficial.

Hypocrisy lies in telling students to take pride in their surroundings when the building in which they spend at least six hours a day, five days a week is left in disrepair (broken windows, non-functioning light fixtures). The students' cries for better facilities and for better maintenance of the existing school building support my contention that the older children in the school, particularly the sixth-graders who participated in the study, are aware of the hypocrisy implicit in all this.

Hypocrisy lies in claims to desires to developing the "whole" child, as expressed in the principal's "goals," while depriving that child of recreation areas and equipment in which to develop his/her physical side. (The students spoke of their being deprived of the privilege of using the basketball court adjoining the school property and I related a mandate from the principal that older students were not to play with playground equipment.) Coupled with this is the deprivation of extra-curricular activities that enhance the development of the whole person. (I referred to the sixth-grade teacher's remarks concerning teachers' refusal to stay after school, because of fear of the neighborhood.)

Hypocrisy lies in teachers, principals and parents telling students that the powers-that-be are concerned about their welfare, when they have to sit in their classrooms in overcoats to protect them from the cold. I reported one of the third-grade teacher's admissions to her class that the administration really did not care about them (meaning herself and the students who were shivering from the cold).

Hypocrisy lies in teaching children about good nutritional habits (e.g., the assembly with clowns representing the four food classes) and forcing them to eat food that is neither nutritious nor palatable. (I spoke of the sixth-grade teacher's warning to me not to eat the food and the students' complaints about the food).

Hypocrisy lies also in claiming to want children to develop socially acceptable table manners and forcing them to gulp food down to make way for subsequent groups of students. The conflict in values is equally evident in having the students eat in a dining room with large open garbage cans by the tables as table scrap containers.

Hypocrisy lies in giving children the impression that they are safe and secure (security guards, locked doors, barred windows) and then allowing security guards not to do their jobs, unsavory intruders to roam the halls and doors not to be locked. My first day at the site an announcement from the PA system asked teachers to secure their doors as an intruder was on the halls and they were trying to apprehend him before the police arrived. The sixth-grade girls told me of unsavory men they encountered in the halls.

Hypocrisy lies in telling children that their parents have to be partners with the school, enticing them through awards to bring their parents to school, and then not giving the parents a real role to play, nor reaching out to parents in ways that meet their schedules (e.g., holding parent encouragement sessions at ten o'clock in the morning and PTA meetings at 4:00 in the afternoon. However, this practice was changed when the new principal arrived.)

Hypocrisy lies in telling students that one must respect others and then not showing respect for them. The lack of respect for subordinates seemed to trickle down through the system the Central Office Administrators not informing the principals of their transferals in a timely fashion (the changing of principals toward the end of the school year had a strong affect on some students, as you will see in student-comments later in the paper), the principal not informing the

teachers of my pending arrival, an administrative assistant's telling a student, "Carry your butt to class," a third-grade teacher's telling students to "shut those lips"). Statements revealing the perception of lack of respect on the part of the teachers were made over and over again, particularly by male students. I have also pointed out evidence that this awareness develops even at the third-grade level. These boys respond to what they perceive as a lack of respect for them by openly defying the teacher's authority, or by refusing to perform in school. Open defiance leads to suspension, suspension causes them to get even further behind in their school work, getting behind in their school work leads to poor performance on tests, which ultimately leads to retention, or their dropping out of school altogether.

Hypocrisy in the Culture of the Classroom

I described the third-grade classrooms as being physically pleasant and ample. I could make no such claims about the size or layout of the classroom for the sixth-graders. Thirty-six sixth-graders on the third floor were compelled to occupy the same amount of space that twenty-two third-graders occupied on the first floor. What does this say of claims for respect for individual differences made by educators in the Public School System?

While the curriculum and daily lesson plans sent down from the Department of Education were possibly an attempt at equalizing education for all, is there not a hint of hypocrisy even in this? Does it not ignore the differences in individual abilities and show little respect for individual teacher-initiative which the Board of Education claims to espouse?

Hypocrisy in Classroom Procedures

There is no question in my mind that it is better to identify an ideal for which one can reach than not to have such goals. Yet, I wonder what effect reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and singing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" have on children who soon learn that "one nation under God with liberty and justice for all" and "sweet land of liberty" are not consistent with messages they receive from the mass media or experience in their daily lives. By the time the students reach the sixth-grade level, they are, undoubtedly, aware of the controversy over prayers in school and racial, religious and sexual inequities in the nation. One sixth-grader asked her teacher if they were supposed to say "under God" and the teacher replied "That's what you see there, don't you?" Such conflict causes pain to teachers and students alike.

Is there not hypocrisy in telling students that self-discipline is the goal of education when they are given so little opportunity to develop it in the so-called process of educating? Appointing monitors to oversee the class when the teacher leaves, and to report on anyone who speaks, or moves; compelling students to ask permission to move about the room, even when their movement would not disturb others and requiring that students ask for permission to go to the bathroom are all examples of teacher-control that belie claims of instilling self-discipline in students. What values are being instilled when teachers require students to line-up by sex and height to walk through the hallways? Is this not just another attempt to mask the reality of external control?

It is hypocrisy when teachers talk about the worth of all children regardless of ability or background, but daily hold up as models to the class those students who are good academically (like Ian in Mrs. Able's third-grade class), or who are quiet and compliant (like Anthony, Mrs.

Charles' sixth grader).

There is hypocrisy when teachers speak of the importance of self-esteem and yet denigrate the students at every moment and display the low expectations that give rise to low self-esteem. "Most of these boys are not going to make anything of their lives," Mrs. Charles told me.

Hypocrisy lies in telling students that individual differences are to be honored and punishing them for lack of conformity whether this occurs in language usage, physical appearance, behavior, intellectual abilities or otherwise. This applies also to making demands that individual students cannot meet (e.g., requiring health insurance for cheerleaders).

Hypocrisy lies in telling African American children that they should take pride in their heritage and then teaching them only a heritage of shame (slavery), and following a curriculum that devotes one month out of the year to peripherally touching upon the role that black people have played in the history of the world still masking the significance of the contribution of black people to the development of this country.

The puritan ethic that teaches that to waste time is to waste money (and wasting money in a capitalistic society is a sin) plays itself out in the classroom with constant admonitions by the teachers to hurry up. In one lesson, Mrs. Baker tells her third-grade class to "Take your time, boys and girls!" and a few minutes later she orders the monitor to "Take his paper, honey! We have to move on." It is hypocritical, I contend, to pretend that time is not important at one moment and then to penalize students for "taking their time" the next.

It is hypocritical for Mrs. Baker to tell the monitor to report to her any bad behavior that occurs during her absence from the class and then to reprimand a girl on another occasion for doing just that with "Don't be a tattle-tale!"

Hypocrisy in the Language of the Classroom

Language, according to many critical theorists (Gramsci 1988; Foucault 1980), plays a large role in reinforcing the domination of the powerless by those in power. Antonio Gramsci puts it very succinctly:

> Every language contains the elements of a conception of the world. The vocabulary helps mark the boundaries of permissible discourse, discourages the clarification of social alternatives, and makes it difficult for the dispossessed to locate the source of their unease, let alone remedy it (Lears 1985:569-570).

This statement is applicable to the school setting. The language used by teachers in the classroom attempts to disguise the element of control that underlies it. I have given many examples in my discussion of language in the classroom-- of how commands are put in the form of interrogatives ("We want to close our lips now, don't we?"). To pretend politeness and respect by saying "Please" and "excuse me" (Mrs. Baker) and calling students by their surnames (Mrs. Charles) is to be hypocritical.

Teachers say that they want students to show initiative and to be able to speak articulately, but freedom of expression is stymied by phrases like "I don't want any talking out loud!" or "Stick to the point!"

Can teachers be sincere in wanting boys and girls to write well and to speak well, when they give the students so little opportunity to speak and write? I describe lessons that reveal how

little time is allowed for the children to speak and how, when they do speak, it is merely to offer a response to a question in incomplete sentences or to form a sentence exactly as the teacher anticipates it.

There is hypocrisy when the teacher tells the students that they must show initiative and be creative and then proceeds to "put them down" for asking a question that seems irrelevant at the time, or tells them they are not being creative when their creativity does not conform to the teacher's expectations (e.g., Mrs. Charles' lesson on "sequencing" in which the students were to form groups and describe the sequences one would take in doing a task of their choice. They undertook the assignment with enthusiasm, when it became time to report back to the whole class, one boy was eager to share that the task his group had chosen was to bake a cake. "I wish you had picked something that wasn't so ordinary," Mrs. Charles responded. That was the end of the fun in that lesson for everyone. After that, no one wanted to respond.

Student Awareness of the Hypocrisy

I presented detailed dialogues in the ethnography between the students and me which make it patently clear that most of the time students are aware of the hypocrisy in the system. The terms that the students use to describe this hypocrisy are "meanness" and "unfairness," but when they juxtapose these terms with an expression like "Why should I respect them when they don't respect me?" in reference to teachers, they are pointing out the disparity between what the teachers say and what they do. What they are describing is hypocrisy.

I contend that the nature of structural hypocrisy keeps even adults in the system unaware of the source of the discomfort that hypocrisy causes. Consequently, the students are not always aware of the source of hypocrisy (principal, teacher, parent, or the government), but they place most of the blame on teachers.

The sixth graders expressed this sentiment more than third graders. While the sixth-grade girls articulated their displeasure with what they perceived as "meanness" on the teacher's, or principal's part, the boys felt that it was disproportionately directed at them. They accused the teachers of "taking up" for the girls and blaming them, "even when they <u>see</u> the girl doing it." One sixth-grade boy spoke of being suspended unfairly for going out a door when he did not know it was forbidden, and other boys joined him in complaining of not being allowed to be heard before being punished. Most of the students complained of the many being penalized for the infractions of a few. Although they may not have been able to articulate it as such, what they were being denied were some of the inalienable rights supposedly guaranteed every citizen by the Constitution of the United States: the right to a fair trial, the presumption of innocence until proven guilty and protection against arbitrariness in determining what in fact is an infraction. Undoubtedly, the hypocrisy in the situation has not been missed on these young men.

The degree of student-awareness of the hypocrisy in the school culture was revealed also in their metaphors for school. I asked all the students in the study to write an essay on what they would compare school with, based on the theory that metaphors subtly get to realities that sometimes one is hesitant to reveal. My contention is that when students compare something that adults have told them is liberating and a privilege (school) with something that is restricting and punitive (prison, slavery, hell), they are saying "We believe you are not being truthful to us." They are not accepting the hypocrisy.

My data further suggest to me that the degree of intolerance by students for hypocrisy on the part of teachers and administrators is, to some extent, a function of the age, sex and socio-economic background of the student. Looking back at responses given by all the students both in the study on metaphors for school and in the interviews, more boys than girls made negative responses and the sixth-grade boys were more prone to use negative metaphors than the third-graders or the girls of either third- or sixth-grade. The boys at Crest Elementary gave as many, or more, negative metaphors for school, but their interview comments suggested that their belief is that school is a necessary evil that will lead to better things in the end, whereas the boys at Winton Elementary have no such hope.

Comments about School In the Winton Elementary Students' Own Words[1]
(Displayed with Overhead Projector)

Sixth-Grade Boys' Comments on Metaphors for School

I: **What about you David?**

D: **School is like slavery.**

I: **...Why do you think it's like slavery?**

D: **Because you have to work hard at school and sometimes when you make a mess on the table, you have to clean it with a rag, and you have to clean everybody else's mess, and, and, you didn't do it.**

I: **Well, how does that happen that you have to clean up for other people?**

D: **Like in the lunchroom...**

J: **They say the last one at the table got to clean up.**

A: **I compared school with hell.**

I: **With hell? Why?**

A: **Because, uh, you don't have enough free time. Somebody always watching you and /// you just don't got no place to go.**

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[1] "I" in the following transcriptions refers to me, the interviewer. The student-speakers are referred to by the initial of their first names. Three oblique lines (///)indicate unintelligible words.

Sixth-Grade Girls' Comments on Metaphors for School

L: **I remember saying that school was like going to a far away place and learning a new language...cause you learn different theories. Different kind of subjects.**

C: **I remember saying school was like jail.....It could be fun, if the teachers make it fun. It's up to the teachers and the students to make school fun,....**

CH: **Teachers they be mean... (in support of C's comments.)**

LA: **I said school was like work, because you go to work and to school everyday....You have a boss, your teacher. Go to lunch. But you don't get paid though.**

D: **It's like a prison. Like you put in jail and you chained up and you can't get out. And you got to leave every time they want you to leave and stuff and they be fussin' at you because you do the wrong thing, or something.**

Le: **(elaborating on the prison answer), she [the teacher] step out of the class, she always have to pick somebody to be in charge and tell them that ///we don't never get a break, or talking time.**

A: **'Cause it's same like you just be in your room. You can't go out unless you call someone, you ask. Can't even like go to the bathroom, and it's like a hospital. It's, uh, kind of fun.**

ST: **To me, it's like being in jail....Like you have teachers and they don't want you to do nothing. You got to do the right thing in school...and if you get in trouble, you get locked down, but the only thing different about school, you get suspended, or put out. It ain't fun....**

Sixth-Grade Boys on the Sudden Change in Principals

R: **Miss Green (the former principal) let us sit down and discuss what happened and then decide whether she want this person suspended, or not.**

D: **The reason I want Miss Green back, because, uh, she let us go onto the basketball courts. Now the basketball courts off limits**

to, uh, every... student.

J: They say now we might not have no graduation.

A: And that hurt a lot.

J: ...It's cruel.... We waited six year...

K: It's like jail.

J: Might not need no graduation the way she doin' things. She might suspend everybody before it.

Sixth-grade Girls on the Sudden Change in Principal

I: What did you like about Mrs. Green's (the former principal's) ways?

C: We get to go on the basketball court. We get to do cheers. We get to have...

L: Fun.

C: We had a lot of activities and she, and Mrs. Dean [the new principal] came, she cut all our good activities away. Like, Mrs. Green, she grew up around us. She was here with us. She was the assistant principal and then she moved up to principal. And she had a better understanding of what we were trying to do. She knew our parents. She knew everybody in the community. She knew us. She knew the problems we went through and Mrs. Dean, she's like new to all of this and being that she was not the assistant principal before she was principal, like Mrs. Green was, she hasn't had time to know all of this. She's just like getting into it.

I: She's not from the community?

L: No. She knew...Miss Green knew me ever since I was a baby. She knew my grandmother. My mama. 'Cause she was my mom's principal, and she was on everything.

C: She had us over to her house. My cousin, /// I knew Miss Green before she came to Winton Elementary, because I sung at her church

before.

I: **Oh, I see. Is that the church across the street?**

C: **Uh-huh.**

I: **Yes. She told me she goes to that church.**

C: **She invited me and my cousins over to spend the week-end with her, and that's how I knew Miss Green before she came to Winton Elementary, so a lot of students knew Miss Green before she came to Winton Elementary and that's how, when she was at Winton Elementary, we knew her as more like a friend and confidant and whatever we needed we would come to Miss Green for, but now that Mrs. Dean is the principal, it is hard for us to adjust to it.**

Sixth-Grade Boys on Dislikes about School

I: **What is it about school that people don't like?**

J: **Teachers.**

A: **Work and food....**

I: **What is it about the teachers that you don't like?**

J: **Teachers be like, somebody do something to you, they still back up the girls mostly,..., even the men teachers...back up the girls. [K agrees.]**

I: **In what way?**

J: **They see the girl hit you and they'll, they'll fuss at you...They'll blame me.**

A: **Like a girl'll hit you, like push you around, she (the teacher) see what she actually did, when you hit her, she have to call <u>your</u> name and you have to go to her and get in trouble. She saw the girl hit you, she don't say nothing to the girl.**

J: **'Cause she just see me just lookin' the other way, she yell, Joesph!"**

[laughter.]...every time she see me 'bout, even, she even think I'm 'bout to do something, she calls my name out.

E: **She [the librarian] said the next person who laughs out or talks...she going to take the whole class down there [to the principal's office] to be punished. She say she ain't going to worry about who did it.**

Sixth-grade Girls on Dislikes about School

C: **...Teachers and the children have lost all enthusiasm about coming to school. That's why a lot of kids, like people in our classroom, don't come to school as often as they should. They hook school every chance they get, because school is not one of the funnest places that kids like to be anymore.**

I: **Why? What's not fun about school?**

CH: **Teachers. They be mean...**

L: **How much work they give.**

C: **Like, if Chimaiah's having a real hard time with math, the teacher will get frustrated with trying to help Chimaiah, instead of saying, "Okay, let's do it in a way that Chimaiah understand." ...the teacher'll keep trying to do it the teacher's way...and that will make her [Chimaiah] only more confused about it than learning anything.**

I: **Letitia, what did you say about the principal?**

L: **She meaner than my mother. She grouchy.**

C: **(Who attended classes for the gifted) I got a C in math, because every time they was teaching math, I had to go to Miss P [the computer lab teacher] and classes. I don't think that was fair.**

I: **Did you talk to the teacher about that?**

C: ...I asked her could I just stay for a little while, just to catch on to what they were doin'. "No, you still have to go to that class."

I: Marcie, there are things about [school] that you don't like, I can see. What was the first thing that you said?

M: [After several attempts and being interrupted by others] You can't never put your head down and try to go to sleep. You put your head down and the teacher says, "Put your head up!"

I: ...But, uh, why would you want to to sleep at school?

M: 'Cause it's boring. You have to work on dumb stuff.

La: It ain't dumb. It's what you need to learn.

[All talk at once.]

I: Well, let's take one at a time. Now, Marcie, you feel it's dumb. Why?

M: Because every time we do something, then she stop and we got to do something else on the board, then/// "You all better be finished at twelve," and then we got, we got to rush and then she stop and then tell us we got to///the board by time twelve o'clock come///and we ain't hardly get a chance to finish it. Then, every time we are doin' our work on the board, somebody come and erase the board.

I: So, you mean you don't get a chance to finish what you have to do, what you are doing.

M: She said we be talkin'. We don't be talkin'. She stops us what we're doing. We never get a chance to finish.

I: You say you want to put your head down on the desk, do you mean because you're tired?

M: Yes, we're tired...'cause when you get finished eatin', you go to sleep.

C: Kindygarteners get to do it. Why can't we get to do it? we work harder than they do. I think I'd rather lay down and get a nap, or

something, and just rest for a couple of minutes and then I'd get back up and finish my work.

D: **...They be fussin' at you because you do the wrong thing, or something.**

M: **And embarrass you in front of everybody... Especially you know who, Mrs. Charles**

I: **And teachers do sometimes call you stupid and dumb?**

M: **Yes. Say, "Your dumb self."**

Le: **And then they say, "You better not go home and tell your mother!" and stuff like that.**

M: **She say, "If you go home and tell your mother, I'm just going to tell her why I said it."**

D: **Uh-huh. Miss Charles said that you was a nincompoop and calling people...**

Le: **She gave Robert the name Stupid, wasn't it?**

M: **No, it was Junior.**

Le: **No, no. It was another name like... [All talk at once.]**

M: She too rough on us. And then, one time LeShawn was in charge and everybody in the classroom was talking and stuff and Miss Charles came into the classroom, said,...

C: "I know you have a lot of names."

M: Uh-huh, and all of us had to stay in 'cause LeShawn ain't had nobody's names and she told us she goin' to let us talk. She be right by the door....

C: She say, "Talk!" and then when you get ready to talk, she yell at you' cause you're talking. She never listens to us.

D: Like Miss Charles, she pick the people who she [all talk at once] who she think, who she like.

M: She don't hardly ever pick me.

I: Pick you for what?

D: To go on errands for her. She just pick LeShawn, Anthony...and Letitia.

C: Just like when we were in [after school] class, she ignored everybody in class except Yolanda and Renee.

M: Uh-huh. She don't never pay any attention to me.

I: Why do you [have to] stay after school?

S: Cause they be bad.

Y: A minority of the class act up, but a little bit of the people don't act up, but half, the majority of the class act up so the whole class got to suffer for the rest of the class. That's not fair.

I: You don't think that's fair.

Y: **[In a sing-song fashion] If you didn't do the crime, you shouldn't do the time. [All laugh.]**

S: **I don't like school that much.**

I: **Shakia, you don't like school?**

S: **Because we be goin' trips and you done paid for your money and you get in trouble, sometimes you can't get your money back and sometimes you can, and like I'm going to Florida with my school and I waited for six months and a person who said that some of us might be getting our money back, if we don't act good and some of us are good, and some of us are bad.**

C: **I would change the rules.**

I: **The rules? Making them what?**

C: **'Cause, uh, the teachers, like, when you have something to do and it's personal and you want to go to the bathroom, you go to ask the teacher and tell them everything. I would change that rule, if you got to go real bad, you got something to do, you would just have to go. You could just walk out the classroom.**

ST: **I'd change the fighting. I'd change the teachers. I'd change everything in school, 'cept for the work.**

In contrast to the sixth-graders, the majority of third-graders said that they liked school and they liked their teachers:

Third-Grade Girls on What they Liked about School

I: **How do you feel about school?**

L: **It's fun to go to school, 'cause you get, you get good grades and do work and stuff. You get to play.**

R: **I like it alot, 'cause it's fun when you do the activities, and...**

J: **And you get to play, they give you a time to eat, play, recess, they give**

you the afternoon to go outside cause they know you be, uh, tired of doing work.

R: **And then, and then, after we come from recess, our teacher tell us to lay down...**

J: **And sleep and go to sleep for an hour or something.**

R: **Sometimes we go to PE and play some more. ...**

I: **So generally you like school.**

R: **Yes.**

What Third-Grade Boys Liked about School

L: **I don't have to go to detention....I don't do anything that bad and I don't have to fight.**

IA: **I don't fight either. I'm an honor roll student...And, I go upstairs to this teacher. She not special ed, [Lemont went to the special ed class] she gifted and talented teacher...I get A's on my report card and B's.**

I: **Oh, that's wonderful....**

IA: **I 'on't, I on't, uh, I on't get in fights. I 'on't, I 'on't never got to go in detention. I on't never get hit by one of the teachers. I on't never have to stand in the corner. I always bring my homework. If somebody takin' my stars off for my behavior, and there's this boy name Michael, I know he be doin' it.**

K: **The only thing I like about school is reading, and I like and I don't like to do work at school neither. [All laugh.] [Keith is one of the two boys from this class attending gifted and talented classes].**

I: **What do you like about reading? What is it that's good about it?**

K: **I <u>know</u> it.**

I: **Oh, it's easy.**

K: Yeah.

L: Yeah, it's easy.

S: All you got to do is just read the words.

L: It's like, it's like, it's like easy as watching your baby sister, or something.

S: It's easy as one, two, three.

I: What about math, then, why don't you like that? You told me that...

L: Cause it's hard.

K: When you get, when you get, when you get a little more math inside of you, like up here [pointing to his head], it gets, starts getting easy.

I: All right. So the more you know about something, the easier it is to do. So I guess if you work hard at it, it becomes easier, then you like it.

D: One thing that I like about school is math, but, uh, like he says [referring to Eric] but I like division.

R: ...Math is easy, but first you have to do is think and then you have to work the problem.

I: What do you like about math Eric?

E: I like about math, because they let you do it by yourself and think it over.

I: ...You like being able to work on your own.

E: Yep. Sometimes when you work on your own, you can think and you can, like, if you have a question, you can raise your hand and sometimes, if you don't understand it, you can still, uh, uh, ask the teacher to tell it to you....

Hypocrisy and the School Performance of the Boys

While the sixth-grade girls were extremely articulate in explaining what they disliked about school, the boys were more emphatic about their dislikes. The boys' response to what they perceived as "unfairness" in school seems to have taken the form of failing grades and resisting authority. I do not recall a girl in one of the classes I was studying ever being suspended the entire year I was there. The teachers informed me of at least four of the boys' being suspended and some of them more than once. The students told me of even more suspensions and drop-outs in our interviews. Out of nineteen boys originally on the sixth-grade teacher's register, six were no longer there at the end of the school year. The third-grade teacher informed me that only one of the girls in her class was at risk of being retained in the third grade, while all six of the boys she designated "at risk" had that possibility. In the ethnography, I reported what one of the third-grade teachers and the sixth-grade teacher said to me about the performance of the outstanding boys in their respective classes. The third-grade teacher could predict success for only two of the fourteen boys in her class; she designated six as being at risk of failure. The sixth-grade teacher could see only one of the thirteen male student's in her class "making anything of his life," while she opined that six were headed for certain failure.

Pertinent to this study are the values, norms, perceptions, beliefs, sentiments and prejudices that underlay the American culture at large and support the educational system: self-worth, equality, individuality, independence, aggression, freedom of expression, freedom of association, initiative, steadfastness, leadership, self-discipline. The problem lies not in such ideals as these values and beliefs express, (although those promoting Afro-centric values have suggested that some of these are Euro-centric values whose worth should be questioned), the real problem lies in the disparity between the ideals expressed and the reality experienced. The culture of Winton Elementary School (its physical appearance, the classrooms and the activities in them, its rules and regulations, the language used, the interpersonal relationships observed, and most importantly of all, the statements made by teachers and students alike) revealed a reality which honored not equality but inequality, not individuality but conformity, not leadership but submission, not creativity but regimentation, not self-discipline but externally imposed discipline.

As I stated earlier, the greater the disparity between the ideal and the real, the greater the need to mask reality. The consequence of masking reality is the toll on the emotional well-being of those who wear the mask. Young Black males are not the only ones who suffer the consequences, all of us do.